

TESSEXUALITY – A VICTIM CULTURE

by TONY FINCHAM

Critical discussions of sexual aspects of Hardy's works inevitably tend to focus on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* – without doubt a reflection of the enormous erotic energy bound up in this novel. Tess is the heroine whom Hardy describes so lovingly in all her moods and appearances, mirrored by and mirroring the natural world, which she inhabits. He closely observes her development from a schoolgirl 'in a pink print pinafore' (32) to a femme fatale 'in a cashmere dressing-gown of gray-white' (397). This is the heroine who is supposed to be based on Augusta Way, a real milkmaid at Lower Bockhampton, whom Hardy knew and admired and whose daughter Gertrude Bugler subsequently acted Tess on stage, rousing a passionate infatuation within the octogenarian Hardy. This is the heroine whose appearance Hardy could identify in a real woman, Lady Cynthia Graham met at a crush in 1893 (LY 26). This is the heroine about whom critics go overboard:

The narrator's erotic fantasies of penetration and engulfment enact a pursuit, violation and persecution of Tess in parallel with those she suffers at the hands of her two lovers. Time and again the narrator seeks to enter Tess through her eyes ... (Boumelha 120)

In *Tess*, Hardy has created such an object of erotic fantasy that all involved – author, narrator, family, lovers, other characters, reader and critics – become implicated in her abuse and tragic downfall. Hardy's creation of such a sexually-charged text has been aided by the strict self-censorship which he had to impose in order to satisfy the rigid restraints of Grundyism and serial publication for family reading. The resultant flirtatious balance between what can be said and what remains unspoken parallels the narrative contrast between love as an idea and love as a physical reality. In critical terms, Tess emerges as both sex object (the subject of perpetual male abuse/electation) and sexy woman who, drawn through the floating

pollen of the damp garden by the indifferent sounds of Angel's harp reaches 'her plateau of sexual ecstasy ... with waves of orgasmic dilatation' leading to withdrawal and post-orgasmic 'detumescence' (Morgan 88).

In psychological terms, Tess is a victim who paves her own way to the hangman's noose just as surely as Jesus paved his own way to the cross. Just as Tess 'is asleep, or in reverie, at almost every crucial turn of the plot' (Boumelha 121) so she is asleep to all the warnings or cautions that are offered her.

Thus she infallibly chooses the martyr's course. Neither her upbringing in a small two-bedroomed cottage, where coition forms her parents only productive activity, nor 'her trained National teachings and Standard Knowledge under an infinitely Revised Code', (TD 18) seem to have endowed her with any knowledge of human sexual behaviour. Unaware that 'there was danger in men-folk' she berates her mother for not providing sex education. Literature also was not on the school curriculum because unlike a lady, she had not had access to the 'novels that tell them of these tricks' (TD 85). Joan Durbeyfield alas is ignorant of both contraception and abortion. Poor Tess!

This conversation occurs on the morning of her parting from Alec who has instructed her quite clearly:

If circumstances should arise – you understand – in which you are the least in need, the least difficulty, send me one line, and you shall have by return whatever you require.

(TD 80)

Alec may be referring here just to financial help but it is equally plausible that he could have supplied 'female pills' to relieve 'suppression of the menses' or the address of the local abortionist. 'Absurdly melancholy Tess' (TD 81) who already realises that 'circumstances' have arisen, stubborn in her martyrdom, refuses the proffered help which renders her subsequent diatribe against her mother somewhat the less convincing.

When Tess re-encounters Alec several years later and recounts her troubles, he immediately reverts to his original offer: 'Why did you not write to me when you felt your trouble coming on?' (TD 325). He also confesses to her that 'yours was the very worst case I was concerned in!' (TD 330). Does this just mean that dark Car, Nancy and the other Trantridge girls willingly accepted his advances without coercion, or did they swallow 'female pills' as required, or was it just that Alec forgot his condoms in the excitement of finally penetrating Tess? Alternatively, was Tess the only virgin to be found in that hard-drinking neighbourhood thick with 'vegeto-human pollen'? (TD 62)

Joan Durbeyfield interprets Tess's victim tendency as her 'Childish Nature to tell all that's in (her) heart – so simple!' Joan's mind, uncluttered by the advantages of a sixth-grade education, knows full well that 'No girl would be such a Fool' as to trumpet her trouble 'specially as it was long ago and not your fault at all'. (TD 199/200). But Tess, obstinately bound for self-sacrifice, marries Angel and then decides that 'She would pay to the utmost farthing; she would tell, there and then'. (TD 233) In the subsequent furore, she offers first to act the Eustacia and put an end to herself by drowning in the river and then contemplates hanging herself under the mistletoe with the cord of her box. Angel, weak and troubled though he may be, can recognise the voice of the hysteric. He reprimands her for speaking so absurdly in a case 'which is rather one for satirical laughter than for tragedy' (TD 243).

'Poor wounded' Tess persists in pursuing the difficult options, failing to obtain financial help from the estranged Angel or his parents despite the fact that 'her present condition was precisely one which would have enlisted the sympathies of old Mr and Mrs Clare' (TD 314). She thus sets the scene for her renewed prostitution with Alec and her subsequent crucifixion, which occurs first symbolically on the altar table at Stonehenge and then in aseptic reality in Wintonchester gaol. The victim has gained her glorious immortality. As Dr Tom Main, a leading pioneer of psychosexual medicine in England, said:

The best way to make the world suffer and feel guilty for two thousand years is to get yourself crucified. It is a very cruel thing to do. (ed. Skrine 165)

Hardy's profound psychological insight steers her with unerring precision towards her inevitable doom. Tess should thus be seen as a victim of her own psychological make-up rather than 'a victim of male splitting of women (Angel idealising and Alec debasing her)' (Wright 1989 107). This 'Madonna versus Whore' dichotomy has little place in the understanding of Hardy's women; in the context of Tess, such an interpretation is unjust to Alec and fails to acknowledge the depth of Angel's psychopathology.

Sympathy with Alec Stoke-d'Urberville may at first sight appear to be a form of sympathy with the devil; and in a way rightly so, for Hardy initially takes care to present him as a typical stage villain – a swarthy 'handsome horsey young buck' with a 'bold rolling eye' and facial contours touched with barbarism (TD 35, 48). However, as Tess' story progresses, Hardy – despite himself maybe – cannot avoid an increasingly sympathetic and psychologically realistic portrayal of this young man who ultimately sacrifices his life as victim to Tess's inner mental turmoil. Alec in many ways is the most Hardyian character in the story; even though, unlike the majority of Hardy's heroes, he has money but no role in life. He does however share with them one major motivating factor – his love for a beautiful woman: 'there was never before such a beautiful thing in Nature or Art as you ... "Cousin" Tess' (TD 58).

Like Jocelyn Pierston, Alec pursues a Well-beloved which in this case finds bodily incarnation in a single woman – Tess – whose rosy curving 'holmberry lips' (TD 51) and 'maddening mouth' (TD 338) haunt him year after year and draw him like a siren away from better intentions (Methodist Preacher) to his doom – a sorry death in a boarding house in Sandbourne. Like Hardy, like Pierston, Alec is a man 'in whose long vision' she stands there fast' (CP 261). Alec's love for Tess is the most enduring and the most convincing love in the novel. Hardy assists in Alec's

rehabilitation by offering mitigating psychological explanations for his aberrant behaviour.

Firstly, Parson Clare tells Angel that Alec's initial remorseless abuse of women is a most culpable passion, which developed 'after the death of the senior so-called d'Urberville' (TD 173). Secondly, Alec describes how his seeming 'whimsical conversion' to Methodism was precipitated by 'the loss of my mother' which caused his sensitive nature to react, rather over-react, to his previous errant ways. Fully rounded character or not, Alec is ultimately, like many of Hardy's most sympathetic characters, driven by a 'burning desire to see a woman' – Tess (TD 338).